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Entertaining Australia

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## ENTERTAINING AUSTRALIA

Edited by Katherine Brisbane

Currency Press

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Reviewed by Don Dunstan.

The history of the entertainment industry in Australia is complex and it is difficult to provide a coherent story covering the field because developments in theatre, in music, in film and radio and television while overlapping in time nevertheless cannot be recounted effectively using the same time frames.

Previous attempts to put information together have been messy and ineffective. In reviewing the "Performing Arts Year Book 1978" I said "My great disappointment is that the year book contains no comprehensive material on the actual running and management of the performing arts. You cannot sort out the function of the Australia Council, the Elizabethan Theatre Trust, the State performing arts grants, the Arts Councils, the statutory and other funded companies, nor follow the changes which occurred in their areas in 1978, from this book. In the film section you may be able to glean something of the Australian Film Commission, but it is impossible to discover its relationship to the State Film Commissions and Corporations or to discover the

differences in organisation and activity between these. To anyone without a great deal of background knowledge of performing arts activity the only information which can be gleaned from this book is either limited or confusing. Which is sad."

None of those strictures can apply to "Entertaining Australia" : in its summary of entertainment in this country up to 1975 there has been a superb job done at chronicling important events and developments, and significant work by the whole range of people in the industry. To do so without severe distortions in a chronological account, and dealing with a host of contributors as well as a mass of material is a remarkable accomplishment by Katherine Brisbane. One of the biggest problems for an editor in such a book is to maintain some consistency of style and presentation. In this book I found none of the unevenness one is used to in large collections of work by different authors. As to its comprehensiveness - I ran a number of checks at random on matters that were within my knowledge in the industry and the book unfailingly dealt with them. For anyone engaged or interested in entertainment in Australia this must become the essential reference book. But it is not just as a reference that one needs it. It is possible within the book to follow the stories of developments of the great national institutions, (the A.B.C., the Australian Opera, the

Australian Ballet,) of professional theatre companies, (such as the unique development of the Melbourne Theatre Company- why unique? What other such company is run by a board appointed as a committee of a University and plays to more audience in a year than any other two "funded" companies combined ?) of orchestras, of festivals and competitions. The story of the post-war revival of the Australian film industry and its ups and downs can be followed here in a way it is difficult to discover in other publications. And if you want to go dipping in the book it is full of delights: there is a fascinating collection accounts of tours by foreign and returning expatriate artists. You want to know about tours by Melba, Galli-Curci, Flagstad, Richard Crooks or Peter Dawson? It's all here. You want to know about the idiocies of political and judicial control of "propriety" in language and presentation on the stage? It's all here , from "Rusty Bugles" to "Norm and Ahmed" to "America Hurrah" to "Boys in the Band". (As to the latter, it is a pity that a volume of this size simply cannot accommodate anecdotes of the kind that enliven the oral history of the Australian theatre. In giving evidence on the sentencing of some of his actors for using indecent language on the stage Harry Miller was asked if anyone other than the police had complained. " Yes, one little old lady who complained that neither at the beginning or the end of

the performance had we played "God Save the Queen". I told her that I had thought it inappropriate.") You want to know about the rivalry in Australia between Charles Kean and Barry Sullivan, or the career of impresario George Coppin? You will not be disappointed.

It must be said, however, that after 1975 the account is much thinner, and the last fifteen years still need much more coverage. It may well be that this will be provided in three forthcoming "companion" books on music, theatre, film radio and television to be published by Currency Press.

The 1990s are dealt with in an essay by the editor who enthusiastically greets "Bran Nue Dae" as a "watershed for our theatre as much as "Summer of the Seventeenth Doll" was in 1955". She looks forward to the 90s with the hopefulness which comes from the musical's "celebration, a great paeon of forgiveness and joy".